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Ustream, Justin.tv, Livestream, and Bambuser: Streaming Unplugged

With just a laptop and a camcorder, four leading live streaming service providers let you deliver webcasts from almost any location.

By Jan Ozer

For the rest of the June/July 2012 issue of Streaming Media magazine please [click here](#)
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If you have a camcorder at any enterprise, institutional, or even social event, you should consider streaming that event live. Live streaming can be free or relatively inexpensive, and live streaming services such as Ustream, Justin.tv, Livestream, and Bambuser are all reasonably easy to use. In the pages that follow, I present reviews of these four services; there are more out there, but these four have emerged as leaders, particularly during the Arab Spring and worldwide Occupy protests of the past year.

All live streaming services providers (LSSPs) share three main components -- the channel page, the embeddable player, and encoding options -- and these are the three areas I focused on in the reviews that follow.

The channel page is the page on the service's website where viewers go to watch your videos. This is obviously most important to organizations that want the bulk of their views to come on the channel page, as opposed to an embedded player on their own site or on a third-party site.

When comparing the channel pages, I looked at page configurability, monetization options, the number of eyeballs that the streaming service could direct to your video, social media options, and the playback experience on iOS and Android devices. For those who want to control the distribution of their videos, I also looked at the access control options available for each site and alternatives for moderating or otherwise controlling chat and comments.

Regarding the embedded player, I looked at how the feature set compared to the channel page; for example, whether you could access the same level of chat and social media-related functions and your video library. I also looked at how the embedded player performed

on Android and iOS devices and whether the site could embed a video feed into Facebook, as opposed to providing a link back to the channel page.

All of these LSSPs offer browser-based encoding tools driven by the Adobe Flash Player, which provided ease of use but universally poor quality since Flash Player uses very outdated codecs. So here, I looked at the feature set and ease of use of other encoders offered by the site, as well as how easy the service made it to use third-party encoders such as the [Adobe Flash Media Live Encoder](#) and Telestream, Inc.'s popular [Wirecast](#).

Ustream

Ustream is the largest live streaming service provider and offers an unlimited free live streaming service funded by advertising, as well as white-label versions starting at \$99 per month. Otherwise, Ustream is competent throughout, with highlights such as the ability to deliver multiple user-selectable streams. My only reservation is the clumsy embedded player; it would return me to the Ustream channel page when I click any videos in the library.

Ustream offers extensive monetization programs, including advertising splits, and pay-per-view and subscription offerings. Ustream also offers lots of control over your videos. You can make any individual video private or only viewable by those in a group. You can also make your channel private, remove it from Ustream.tv, and restrict embedding to specific URLs. Corporate sites might also value the ability to moderate all comments before they appear, while all users will appreciate the easy ability to download previous broadcasts.

CHANNEL PAGE

Ustream offers very rich channel pages and an equally rich broadcast experience. Notable features include the ability to schedule broadcasts, which appear as upcoming shows on your channel page. Once completed, you can add highlights in your broadcasts, which are essentially cue points with a short text description that viewers can jump to. You get all the expected social media options such as tweeting, liking to Facebook, and +1-ing to Google+.

On the design side, you can add iFrames to your channel page, creating custom content boxes that you can populate as desired. Beyond that, Ustream lets you create extensions that display links beneath your videos to products that you sell (on Amazon, iTunes, or Thumbplay), your Twitter and Facebook pages, and banners that you can link to your website or any other site. That's how I created the link to my book beneath the player in Figure 1. You can also see the Streaming Learning Center text overlay on the upper left of the video in Figure 1, another nice (and rare) design option.

When your channel isn't live, you have several options, including playing your last recorded video, a specified playlist, or a slideshow that you can create in the administrative module; all are great options to make sure that your channel never goes dark. This worked well on my

window with the message “This content is currently not online” in both the channel player and the embedded players. During the broadcast, you can add text overlays to your live stream (see **Figure 1**) or post polls, though neither of these appeared on videos playing on my iPad or iPod touch. They did appear on my Android-based Toshiba Thrive and in the embedded player.



Figure 1. The Ustream landing page is very feature-rich, including those links to ecommerce sites such as Amazon beneath the player.

On the iPad, Ustream took a few moments to “optimize” the stream, and then it played in a window with frequent pauses for rebuffering. I asked a Ustream rep about this, and he said that the stream needs to be repackaged for iOS. But once this is done, subsequent users should be able to play the files without this lag, which my tests confirmed. On the Toshiba Thrive, the video played quickly and responsively within the video window on the page, with very little latency.

EMBEDDED PLAYER

Ustream's embedded player is not a particular strength of the system. You have two options: You can embed the live video player -- sans chat or access to the video library -- or you can embed the Social Stream, which provides access to the video library and chat (**Figure 2**). Of course, you can embed both, but the result is a bit clunky -- two separate but related clumps of content on a page (**Figure 3**).

Live **Social Stream**

Embed the live video player anywhere using the code below

```
<iframe src="http://www.ustream.tv/embed/8776867" width="608" height="368" scrolling="no" frameborder="0" style="border: 0px none transparent;"></iframe>
```

480 x 296 **608 x 368** 864 x 512 Custom:

Width: px
Height: px

use the old embed code instead

Figure 2. Ustream's embed options: You have to embed both Live and Social Stream to have access to your video library and chat.

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